

James Laughlin and Thomas Merton: “Louie, I Think This Is the Beginning of a Beautiful Friendship”

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You are reading this volume of *The Merton Annual* because of your appreciation and love of Thomas Merton as monk, contemplative, spiritual writer, ecumenical guide, activist. We all have some idea of the trajectory of Merton’s life from young reprobate, would-be poet and journalist, through his conversion to Catholicism and eventually his entry into Gethsemani, becoming Brother and then Father Louis. Perhaps you have read *The Seven Storey Mountain*¹ and many of Merton’s other works, from the purely spiritual such as *Bread in the Wilderness*² to those touching on Asian religion such as *The Way of Chuang Tzu*³ to his poetry, most recently showcased in *In the Dark before Dawn*,⁴ expertly edited by Lynn Szabo. Just look up a title by Merton on Amazon and the author bio says: “Thomas Merton is arguably the most influential American Catholic author of the twentieth century.”

But in this article devoted to exploring Merton’s relationship with one person who occupied a special role in his life, you will meet James Laughlin, founder and publisher of New Directions, and some of you will say, “James who?” New Directions began publishing Merton’s poems in 1944⁵ and continues to publish and now keeps in print all of Merton’s poetry⁶ plus a wide variety of titles from *New Seeds of Contemplation*⁷ to *The Wisdom of the Desert*.⁸ When Laughlin died in 1997, the very best obituary appeared in *The Nation* magazine by the elegant and provocative essayist Eliot Weinberger. It began: “Every consideration of James Laughlin and New Directions must begin with The List: a list numbing to recite, overwhelming in its whole and astonishing in its particulars.

1. Thomas Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1948).

2. Thomas Merton, *Bread in the Wilderness* (New York: New Directions, 1953).

3. Thomas Merton, *The Way of Chuang Tzu* (New York: New Directions, 1965).

4. Thomas Merton, *In the Dark before Dawn: New Selected Poems*, ed. Lynn R. Szabo (New York: New Directions, 2005).

5. Thomas Merton, *Thirty Poems* (Norfolk, CT: New Directions, 1944).

6. Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton* (New York: New Directions, 1977); subsequent references will be cited as “CP” parenthetically in the text.

7. Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation* (New York: New Directions, 1961).

8. Thomas Merton, *The Wisdom of the Desert: Sayings from the Desert Fathers of the Fourth Century* (New York: New Directions, 1960).

New Directions was the publisher—and almost always the first publisher in the United States—of . . .”—and here follows a very long list from Borges to Tennessee Williams, Nabokov to Sartre, Pound and W. C. Williams to W. G. Sebald. Weinberger continues, “Laughlin was more than the greatest American publisher of the twentieth century: His press was the twentieth century.”⁹ Two extraordinary men receiving extraordinary praise—how did their paths cross and what drew them into a close, almost symbiotic friendship?¹⁰

In this volume of the *Annual*, Ian MacNiven, whose biography of James Laughlin will be published in 2014, writes as a scholar and biographer who has devoted many years to studying Laughlin, his authors and associates, about Laughlin’s editing of Merton’s *The Asian Journal*,¹¹ but I am here to give you a more personal perspective, as someone who knew Laughlin and who understood, on a day-to-day basis, the role that Merton played in his life and he in Merton’s. When I first came to New Directions in 1975, *The Asian Journal* had been published just two years earlier, *The Collected Poems* was in the process of being assembled, and one of my jobs was to make sure that Laughlin’s voluminous correspondence concerning something called the “Merton Legacy Trust” was properly filed. And I learned firsthand the intensity of Laughlin’s devotion to Merton and to the proper publishing of his work. When *The Collected Poems* went to well over a thousand pages and production costs mounted far in excess of revenue expected from sales, it simply didn’t matter. He would do right by his friend Tom, Laughlin said, or he wouldn’t do it at all!

James Laughlin was born into the Laughlin steel family of Pittsburgh in 1914, the year before Merton’s birth in France. He had a privileged

9. Eliot Weinberger, “James Laughlin,” *The Nation* 265.846 (15 Dec. 1997) 38-39.

10. In addition to the usual published sources, I will be quoting from James Laughlin’s unpublished 1982 typescript of 49 pages, simply called “Thomas Merton” (in the Laughlin Literary Executor files of Peggy L. Fox; subsequent references will be cited as “Laughlin, ‘Thomas Merton’” parenthetically in the text), from which is derived the essay “Thomas Merton and his Poetry,” published in James Laughlin, *Random Essays: Reflections of a Publisher* (Mt. Kisco, NY: Moyer Bell, 1989) 3-31 (subsequent references will be cited as “Laughlin, *Random Essays*” parenthetically in the text); it also provided the raw material for Laughlin’s March 18, 1983 interview with Paul Wilkes, published in full in this volume of *The Merton Annual*, and in edited form as “Thomas Merton—A Portrait,” in Paul Wilkes, ed., *Merton by Those Who Knew Him Best* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1984) 3-13, reprinted as an appendix to Thomas Merton and James Laughlin, *Selected Letters*, ed. David D. Cooper (New York: W. W. Norton, 1997) 373-84 (subsequent references will be cited as “SL” parenthetically in the text).

11. Thomas Merton, *The Asian Journal*, ed. Naomi Burton Stone, Brother Patrick Hart and James Laughlin (New York: New Directions, 1973).

and somewhat pampered childhood in a wealthy Presbyterian family with the casual anti-Catholic and anti-Semitic prejudices of its time and class; but unlike his forebears he, through annual excursions to the mill, soon developed an aversion to the fiery furnaces of the family business, Jones & Laughlin Steel. He was an early rebel against his *haute bourgeois*, strait-laced Calvinist upbringing as well as most of the conventions of the society led by Andrew Carnegie and “Uncle Andy” Mellon. But once his intellectual attention was engaged at the Le Rosey School outside Geneva, where he and his brother were sent to escape exposure to their father’s mental breakdown in 1929, he began to excel in his studies. Subsequently enrolled in schools near his highly opinionated but indulgent Aunt Leila Laughlin Carlisle in Norfolk, Connecticut (where he would live for the rest of his days), he emerged as the winner of four of five major prizes in his final year at Choate Academy—graduating three years ahead of John Fitzgerald Kennedy.

Influenced by his literary mentor at Choate, Dudley Fitts, he matriculated at Harvard rather than the “family” school of Princeton. Having been introduced by Fitts to the “moderns,” Ezra Pound and T. S. Eliot, James Joyce and Gertrude Stein, he found the more traditional reading list at Harvard rather a bore and took off for the Continent in 1933, where he *did* meet Pound. He subsequently returned to Europe in 1934, where he *did* stay with Gertrude Stein and studied with Pound at the “Eziversity” in Rapallo, Italy. The curriculum at this unconventional and utterly informal academy was reading what Pound recommended (his friends’ works), listening to Dorothy Pound read Henry James in her cultivated English accent (her mother had been W. B. Yeats’ special friend, Olivia Shakespear), learning Italian at the local cinema, and playing tennis with the Boss (as he called Pound).

In describing how he came to publishing, J (as he preferred to be called—just the initial, no period) often told the tale of Pound’s rejection of his poetry and how Pound thought he “might” be able to manage doing something “useful” like being a publisher (of Pound’s friends of course) and how as a result he founded *New Directions*. As Ian MacNiven’s biography clearly shows, this is probably not literally true. Even when I came to know him in his early sixties, J was in perpetual doubt about his own abilities. Before he met Pound, he had already written a short story about a painter who asked his mentor if he should continue despite the master’s belief that the young man would never reach the highest ranks of artistic achievement. The master replied: “There is always work.”¹²

12. James Laughlin, “Melody with Fugue,” *Random Stories* (Mt. Kisco, NY: Moyer Bell, 1990) 27.

But while Laughlin often embellished the New Directions “origin myth” (as we liked to call it), the basic outline is true: Laughlin returned to the U.S. to finish at Harvard (eventually) and, at Pound’s urging and with introductions to authors as supplied by Pound, he settled into his “work”—publishing. He began his publishing venture out of his Harvard lodgings in 1936 with *New Directions in Prose and Poetry*, the first New Directions anthology, whose contents page still reads like a Who’s Who of twentieth-century literary greats.

My telling of the Laughlin/Merton story is, by necessity, highly compressed, so we will fast forward to 1943, when New Directions was still a fledgling operation, but one becoming increasingly respected. Meanwhile Thomas Merton had not only entered the Abbey of Gethsemani, but was now Brother Louis. What brought these two men together was unrequited desire—Merton’s to be a poet and be recognized as such and Laughlin, in Merton’s words (written after his first face-to-face meeting with Laughlin), “because he [was] looking for God.”¹³ Before he entered Gethsemani in December of 1941, Merton, in late 1940 or early ’41, sent a few poems to New Directions, hoping to be published in the annual anthology. Publishing secret: knowing how such things work, I can almost guarantee that Laughlin never saw the submission. It would have been given ten minutes, at most, by one of young writers who constituted the office staff in those days. This is how things really work: Mark Van Doren, who had been Merton’s favorite teacher at Columbia, owned a farm near Laughlin’s home in Connecticut, and J, an avid fly fisherman as well as fisher of poets, would sometimes exchange a catch of brook trout for a drink and literary conversation. So in 1943, Van Doren, still in contact with his star pupil, Brother Louis, sent Laughlin a “small sheaf” of Merton’s poems. With Van Doren’s *imprimatur*, Laughlin was able to overcome his admitted prejudice against Merton’s non-experimental style and overtly religious content. Laughlin later wrote: “Now, religious poetry has never been one of my enthusiasms. But I was quickly caught up in this young man’s vividness of language and freshness of imagination” (Laughlin, “Thomas Merton” 2). J was also captured by Merton’s accessibility and found his poetry “extremely likable.” J immediately decided to publish what became *Thirty Poems* in his Poet of the Month series.

But another reason that J took to Merton’s poetry, and then to Merton himself, was his own spiritual longing. Although he had long since given up on church-going, he was drawn not only by Merton’s acceptance of the strictures of monastic life, but also by his joy in this highly controlled

13. Thomas Merton, *The Sign of Jonas* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1953) 53; subsequent references will be cited as “*SJ*” parenthetically in the text.

environment. In *Byways*, Laughlin's poetic "autobiography," he writes in the "Tom Merton" section about his first visit to Gethsemani:

How wrong I had been about the inhabitants!
 These brothers and monks
 Were warriors of joy.
 Happy and friendly, laughing
 And joking, rejoicing in the
 Hard life of work and prayer

...
 These chantings of supplication
 For the whole world, even infidels
 Not just for the monks.
 Such brightness, *lux in aeternitate*.¹⁴

J spoke to Merton about his chronic doubts and Merton replied, "You are not at all made for the misery of the cannibal world you have to live in" (*SL* 20). Merton recommended prayer "in a simple way" (*SL* 20) and supplied titles that might help J advance "my desire to increase the spiritual component in my life" (*SL* 22). Merton instinctively understood J's needs and wrote of their first meeting on June 12, 1947 in *The Sign of Jonas*: "Laughlin is a fundamentally simple person. He is basically religious because he is clean of heart . . . I like him very much. He is the kind of person I can understand" (*SJ* 52-53).

As their relationship deepened through correspondence and repeated visits by J to Gethsemani, each man came more and more to depend on the other: Merton on Laughlin for the support he needed as a poet and writer (as an artist as opposed to a religious thinker)—I will show how by developing Merton's contacts with other writers and artists (sometimes by rather devious means), Laughlin was able to spur a remarkable change in Merton's poetic style and even substance, leading to his flowering as both an activist against segregation and the Vietnam War and as an ecumenical writer looking to other world religions for a deepening of his own Christian faith. Likewise, Merton's belief in his friend's goodness, loyalty and utter reliability led him to trust Laughlin with not only the responsibility for his literary legacy after his death, but with a very personal responsibility for the individual who had touched his heart most deeply. And in return Laughlin, by undertaking these tasks, received his own most profound religious experience in editing *The Asian Journal* as well as a source of focus and stability at a time of crisis in his health and

14. James Laughlin, *Byways: A Memoir*, ed. Peter Glassgold (New York: New Directions, 2005) 219-20.

psychological well-being.

After *Thirty Poems*, New Directions published three more books of Merton's poetry in what, for publishing, amounted to rapid succession (*A Man in the Divided Sea*¹⁵ in 1946, *Figures for an Apocalypse*¹⁶ the following year, and *The Tears of the Blind Lions*¹⁷ in 1949). During this poetic flowering, Merton was ordained a priest on Ascension Day, May 26, 1949. Laughlin confessed that he "cried through most" of the solemn high mass and that "heretic as I am," he took communion from an "exalted" Tom's own hands the next morning when Merton said his first Mass (Laughlin, "Thomas Merton" 18). But after *Blind Lions* was published, Merton went dormant as a poet, and New Directions branched out to publish other Merton titles such as *Seeds of Contemplation*¹⁸ and *Bread in the Wilderness*. Merton responded to Laughlin's devotion to his work with an equal measure of loyalty. In 1951 Robert Giroux made an attempt to corner the exclusive rights to all of Merton's literary output for Harcourt, Brace where he then worked. Giroux might have succeeded had Merton not personally intervened with his agent Naomi Burton (who had sided with Giroux), Merton saying that despite the fact that Laughlin was not "a very orderly businessman," he "is a good guy. He likes to come down here. It does him good to come down here. He has a soul and a destiny to work out for himself which is more important than books" (SL 85). Abbot James Fox, who like Laughlin had attended Harvard, supported J, and J and Tom agreed between themselves that the poetry and certain hard-to-define prose works would be ND's province while "major" projects would go to Harcourt.

The dust-up seemed to solidify the personal connection between J and Tom. As J sensed in Merton a desire to expand his horizons beyond the monastery walls, Laughlin began to supply Merton with a steady stream of New Directions books: in the letters, thanks abound for volumes by Kafka and Rilke, Camus and Faulkner. But some books didn't get past the abbot and, according to J, it was Tom who suggested, "Let's try Jim Wygal," consulting psychiatrist for the monastery. In his essay on Merton's poetry, Laughlin explained, "Gethsemani needed a psychiatrist because after Tom's *Seven Storey Mountain* became a bestseller there was a flood of applicants for admission, many of whom were not sufficiently stable for the hard monastic life. Dr. Wygal screened these postulants. 'Send the books to Jim Wygal's office and when I take a batch of novices up

15. Thomas Merton, *A Man in the Divided Sea* (New York: New Directions, 1946).

16. Thomas Merton, *Figures for an Apocalypse* (New York: New Directions, 1947).

17. Thomas Merton, *The Tears of the Blind Lions* (New York: New Directions, 1949).

18. Thomas Merton, *Seeds of Contemplation* (New York: New Directions, 1949).

there I'll pick them up.' That is how Tom received Henry Miller, Djuna Barnes, and half a dozen others not usually to be found in a monastic library" (Laughlin, *Random Essays* 6). So during the time that Merton had sworn off poetry, Laughlin, by feeding him a steady stream of the more iconoclastic and technically experimental poets (and other writers), many published by New Directions, was shaping the poet that Merton was to become. When Merton resumed sending poems in 1956, Laughlin noted "the beginning of the secularization of Merton's poetry" (Laughlin, *Random Essays* 10-11) in the poems written between 1948 and 1956 that were to appear in *The Strange Islands*.¹⁹

As an indication of Merton's shifting attitudes during this time, I will cite the example of the notorious Henry Miller, author of *Tropic of Cancer* and other banned books. In 1950, Merton showed some alarm at appearing in a New Directions annual that would also include Miller (SL 73). But within the decade, Merton and Miller had become not only pen-pals but, as the young would say, best buds. When Henry wrote to ND, "I feel closer to him [Merton], his way of thinking, than any American writer I know of," Tom responded, "Well, that is a testimonial. I am really warmed by it. To me that is an indication that I am perhaps after all a Christian" (SL 189).

Laughlin also noted Merton's belief that the community and particularly the novices under his care (Merton was Novice Master for ten years: 1955-1965) "should have more access to secular books and know more about the injustices of the outside world and its problems. What good was prayer if you didn't know what to pray for?" (Laughlin, "Thomas Merton" 19). As Merton's reputation as a writer and religious thinker grew, he started corresponding with the Berrigans and other progressives both in the Church and beyond. He became more outspoken about segregation and the peace movement as demonstrated by poems like "And the Children of Birmingham"²⁰ and the strange and chilling *Original Child Bomb*,²¹ published by New Directions in 1962, a prose poem about the bombing of Hiroshima about which J commented: "What sets the poem apart is the new verbal tone, a mixture of satire and irony, fused into black humor" (Laughlin, *Random Essays* 11). Merton was moving away from his earlier conventionally religious poetic persona not only in content but in form.

And when Merton began writing articles for magazines against the,

19. Thomas Merton, *The Strange Islands* (New York: New Directions, 1957).

20. Thomas Merton, *Emblems of a Season of Fury* (New York: New Directions, 1963) 33-35; CP 335-37.

21. Thomas Merton, *Original Child Bomb* (New York: New Directions, 1962); CP 291-302.

as J commented, “business-military complex, against the Pentagon and even against Kennedy” (Laughlin, “Thomas Merton” 24), protests came in to Gethsemani from various American bishops and other Catholics, and Dom James Fox, after consultation with the Abbot General in France, was forced to tell Father Louis basically to SHUT UP—he was to stick to religion and religious poetry, PERIOD. J continued: “But wiley [*sic*] Tom got around the ban. He had the absolute loyalty of the novices and they were willing to mimeograph things in many copies. Tom inaugurated a series of ‘Cold War Letters’ which kept up his drumfire against war and social evils and these were sent out to his large mailing list of editors, friends, and admirers” (Laughlin, “Thomas Merton” 24). What J didn’t mention in this passage from the long essay he wrote on Merton in 1982 is the role that he himself played in the *samizdat* circulation of these influential “letters” to a wide mailing list by introducing Tom to his friend at the Ford Foundation, W. H. “Ping” Ferry (*SL* 381).

In the midst of being told to cease and desist, Tom proposed to J the publication of a peace paperback and, to the astonishment of all, New Directions published a political polemic on the nuclear arms race, *Breakthrough to Peace*,²² to which Merton contributed. (He also edited the book though he was not named as the editor to avoid further controversy.) J had always striven for pure political neutrality on the ND list—the fascist Céline and the communist Neruda were both equally welcome *as artists*—but in *Breakthrough* he helped Tom Merton to storm the establishment citadels, with his encouragement and full backing. These last few “snapshots” of J and Tom illustrate to me the nature of their relationship—they completed each other. J pushed Tom to open himself to the world, to free himself of his self-imposed shackles and engage in the world’s struggles and as an artist to break conventional molds and re-create himself as a poet. Meanwhile, Tom offered J, always something of an aesthete, existing beyond the fray, a way to participate in the struggles of his time without being drawn too directly into conflict. He also offered J spiritual balm in a world that seemed to be fracturing.

Another sign of Merton’s increasing openness, not only to the secular world but also to other religions, was his interest in Zen Buddhism, which goes back at least to 1955 when Tom asked J for books by D. T. Suzuki. By 1959 Merton and Suzuki were corresponding and J was excited by the idea of publishing their letters around the centerpiece of Suzuki’s essay on *Wisdom of the Desert*. Unfortunately the Abbot General of the time (Dom Gabriel Sortais) forbade publication of the exchange as an “inappropriate”

22. [Thomas Merton, ed.], *Breakthrough to Peace: Twelve Views on the Threat of Thermonuclear Extermination* (New York: New Directions, 1962).

linkage with a non-believer. Protesting, J wrote Tom that “It seems to me that it is a good thing for members of one religion to learn about others, in order to develop sympathy and understanding” (*SL* 151). So, cleverly side-stepping, J published “their dialogue between East and West” as the profound “Wisdom in Emptiness” in the annual, *New Directions 17* (1961), where it was less conspicuous than as a stand-alone title. Several years later in 1964, Merton was allowed a rare trip out of Gethsemani to meet Suzuki in New York, which J comments was one of the high points of Tom’s intellectual life (Laughlin, “Thomas Merton” 12-13). Suzuki gave Tom one of his own Japanese brushes, which led to the hundreds of beautiful brush abstracts that Tom was to do in the next few years, illustrating, among other things, his *Raids on the Unspeakable*.²³ Merton’s tribute to Suzuki is the lovely *Zen and the Birds of Appetite* published by New Directions in 1968 which, coming full circle, included “Wisdom in Emptiness.”²⁴

J, as Merton’s co-conspirator in global outreach, was more acutely aware than most that Tom had become “intensely ecumenical.” Laughlin wrote that “He knew that the great religions of the world must come to terms with each other. For years he had been reading all he could about the religions of Asia, the Muslims, the Sufis, various cults, even primitive tribes. . . . As these interests grew, so did Tom’s urge to get out to Asia to meet religious thinkers there. But this was not possible in the reign of Dom James. However, with the accession of Dom Flavian [Burns] everything changed” (Laughlin, “Thomas Merton” 35-36). (Laughlin doesn’t mention that Merton, while deflecting all talk about putting himself forward for election as abbot, quietly championed Burns, his friend and former student.) This led to the invitation Tom received through Dom Jean Leclercq, the influential Benedictine, to attend a conference in Bangkok of leading Asian Catholic monastics interested in monastic renewal. (See the essay in this volume by Ian MacNiven on that fateful trip and the great act of personal devotion and tribute that was Laughlin’s editing of *The Asian Journal*.) While there has been speculation about Merton’s attraction to Buddhism, J was quite clear about the purpose of the trip: “He would try to get to as many of the holy places in the Orient that he had always wanted to visit as he could and talk with spiritual leaders of all faiths, particularly those which practiced contemplation. He wanted to see what these practices might have to offer for Christian contemplation” (Laughlin, “Thomas Merton” 36).

23. Thomas Merton, *Raids on the Unspeakable* (New York: New Directions, 1966).

24. Thomas Merton, *Zen and the Birds of Appetite* (New York: New Directions, 1968) 99-138; see also Merton’s essay, “D. T. Suzuki: The Man and His Work” (59-66).

So far I have been concentrating on the ways in which Laughlin was helping Merton to stretch and extend himself intellectually and in his breadth of sympathy. What is not as clearly documented, but something that I know from J's casual comments, was how much Merton kept J grounded, through his friendship and his faith in J and his publishing enterprise. J couldn't subscribe to particular religious beliefs, but he did have faith, a faith that "word workers" could make a difference and that writers like Tom could cross the boundaries that so often seemed to keep people in armed and separate camps. If Merton could make common cause with Henry Miller, what other walls might come tumbling down? Fostering such relationships, building such bridges was what Laughlin saw as his own spiritual mission.

But J didn't expect (in MacNiven's words) to become confessor to a monk. You have all read or heard about the young nurse "M" who captured Merton's heart and mind while he was in a Louisville hospital following a back operation in 1966. I say it that way rather than "fell in love" because both Merton's subsequently published journal of this period²⁵ and the private journals he gave into J's keeping, reveal that what Merton experienced was a feeling of complete spiritual union with another human being, something that, despite his closeness to the Infinite, had eluded him previously.

Tom wrote letters to M, he wrote a journal in which he tried to analyze what had happened, and he wrote poems to and for M. Merton obviously wanted these records of the most important episode in his emotional life to endure, but whom could he trust for their safekeeping? It was to J he immediately turned. In the 1982 manuscript J wrote, "He did not want these papers in his hermitage so he arranged for me to keep them safe for him. Every so often, usually through an intermediary, I would receive an envelope marked for the 'Menendez file' and I would put it in my bank box" (Laughlin, "Thomas Merton" 32; Frank Menendez was the chef at the Alta Lodge, part of the ski resort J owned in Alta, Utah, and he unwittingly lent his name to the coded file). The poems were eventually published (in 1985) as *Eighteen Poems*²⁶ in an edition limited to 200 copies after J carefully consulted with M—Tom had wanted these poems published, but J was ever respectful of M's privacy and feelings in the matter and thereby tried to limit the circulation of the book as much as possible. My instructions at New Directions were that the book was *never* to be reprinted, *never* to be done in a trade edition, and that permission

25. Thomas Merton, *Learning to Love: Exploring Solitude and Freedom. Journals, vol. 6: 1966-1967*, ed. Christine M. Bochen (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1997).

26. Thomas Merton, *Eighteen Poems* (New York: New Directions, 1985).

to reprint individual poems was to be denied. However, by the time of the publication of the new edition of selected poems, *In the Dark before Dawn*, so many of the poems had appeared in the journals or in unauthorized places that New Directions and the Trustees of the Merton Legacy Trust jointly decided that any poems which had been published elsewhere could be included in that volume.

Merton was also concerned about his literary legacy in general and in 1964, well before the trip to Asia was planned or M had appeared in his life, he had asked J and Naomi Burton Stone to be his literary and artistic executors. And before he embarked on his travels in 1968 he set up the Merton Legacy Trust. J describes the impetus for the Trust this way: “[Tom] was aware from the great success he had had with his books that he was a writer of consequence and he was convinced that certain of his writings would have influence on monastic reform in the future. So he had his friend John Ford, a good lawyer in Louisville, incorporate, as a non-profit trust with the monastery as beneficiary, The Merton Legacy Trust, of which Naomi Burton, Tommie O’Callaghan and myself were the initial trustees. What Tom feared was that at his death his papers might just be packed in cartons and stored in the corner of the monastery library, from where someday some over-zealous housecleaner might throw them away” (Laughlin, “Thomas Merton” 40-41). When word came of Merton’s death, Merton’s Louisville friend Tommie O’Callaghan drove to Gethsemani and filled her station wagon with these papers, which she soon deposited at Bellarmine College for the collection that has become the Thomas Merton Center at Bellarmine University.

Also before he left, with a sense of tidying affairs, Tom sent J two poetry manuscripts, one of which was the unfinished and ongoing *The Geography of Lograire*²⁷ (a map of Merton’s mind, J liked to say). With an eerie prescience Merton made up a list of things J was to take care of should he die during his travels: finish the notes for *Lograire*, publish any journals or writings from the trip (these became *The Asian Journal*), watch over M’s welfare. When the unimaginable happened, J carried out each of these mandates as if it were a sacred commandment. He maintained a watching brief over M, writing to her (in a letter included by David Cooper as an epilogue to the Merton/Laughlin correspondence): “I don’t think you should feel, as you say in your letter, that Tom didn’t know how devoted you were to him. As I reread the poems and journals, it seems clear to me that he did understand, and that you were as close to him as any mortal person could be. He always spoke to me of you with the deepest affection and gratitude for what you brought to his life” (*SL*

27. Thomas Merton, *The Geography of Lograire* (New York: New Directions, 1969).

371). M and J continued to correspond until J's death. Both agreed that Tom had radically changed their lives.

Father Louis and James Laughlin, Tom and J—two unlikely friends who were two parts of a linked story, each representing a road not taken by the other. Tom could not have had a more faithful servant to carry out his wishes, and in fulfilling those mandates, J felt that his own soul had been purified and saved. He ends his rambling 1982 manuscript that became the basis for more polished pieces in an unpolished but heartfelt way: “Dear Tom, if I have said anything in these pages to offend you, please just laugh at me as you always used to do when I said something silly, your laugh that no one could ever forget. Wherever you are, in the heaven for jolly monks, in the ‘palace’ that Chatral Rimpoche told you about, even a tulku in Tibet, know that our friendship goes on and always will” (Laughlin, “Thomas Merton” 49).